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CIA Found Too Weakened To Tackle New Demands

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The well-publicized traumas of the CIA have left it weakened as it attempts to deal with the perils now facing the United States around the world, according to a number of present and former officials in the intelligence community.

The administration is now moving to unleash the agency from some of

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the restrictions placed on it as a result of revelations of past abuses. While President Carter's declaration of his determination to defend vital American interests in the Persian Gulf region "by any means necessary" focused public attention on military actions, it also meant new needs for CIA intelligence-gathering and covert activities.

But, the sources say, there is not as much at Langley to unleash as the government might now feel it needs. Experience and expertise has given way to bureaucratic management, and morale is too low for the kind of willingness to take initiatives that are the spark of a dangerous business, according to many sources.

And, even if the CIA were in better condition, warn both intelligence experts and administration users of their product, an unleashed agency cannot provide a "quick fix" for the hazards ahead in the sharpening U.S. confrontation with the Soviet Union.

"The whole discussion of unleashing the agency is just a red herring to distract attention from the more serious problem of how it's deteriorated," says one expert.

There is disagreement over just how bad the situation is or where the responsibility lies. One former senior CIA official cautions that only the president, possibly his national security adviser, and maybe the two congressional committees on intelligence have enough information and detachment to judge.

Retired Admiral Stansfield Turner, the director of the CIA and head of the government's entire intelligence apparatus, says he is optimistic about the agency's capabilities. Although nothing is perfect,

he says, the CIA has adequate resources for its tasks.

Others say that capabilities have been wasted or thrown away, including some that are now critically needed in the Middle East. Analysis of information collected by spies, reconnaissance satellites and other sources is poor, with the experts' own findings sometimes ignored by Turner in sending evaluations to the White House, these sources say.

They contend that Turner is just trying to paint the best possible picture of his almost three years of responsibility for the agency.

While his numerous critics blame him for many of its difficulties, they agree with him that a lot of problems go back before Carter took his old Annapolis classmate out of the Navy and gave him the intelligence job. One of these problems is a shortage of language talents.

At a time when Iran and Afghanistan are crisis areas, for instance, the CIA has very few people who are fluent in their main languages, Farsi and Dari. Training agents who can work effectively in such languages takes more than year.

The agency also is said by many sources to have a severe shortage of people qualified to handle the kind of paramilitary operations that might become desirable in trouble areas from Afghanistan to increasingly disturbed Central American countries.

There are, for instance, few agents capable of helping the Afghan guerrillas resisting the Soviet occupation, should the administration want to get that involved.

Turner's personnel policies have struck particularly hard at the operational part of the agency, slashing the size of the paramilitary cadre that runs guerrilla operations and demoralizing agents, sources say.

Better Equipped Today

In an interview, however, Turner claimed that, "in the covert action field, we are better equipped today than we were three years ago." He added, "I'm optimistic that morale in the agency has turned around."

This sharp contrast between what is said by Turner and the consistent views of numerous present and past officials shows how controversial the CIA has become — in a new way.

The controversy over the agency in the mid-1970s was over misuse of its powers at home and abroad. Then there was a public perception that the CIA had the talent to do almost anything, but its abilities had been perverted.

There was horror on Capitol Hill over opening of Americans' mail and other domestic surveillance activities, experimenting with drugs on unwitting citizens, and other actions that indicated the agency had turned inward instead of limiting itself to the foreign field. Some foreign actions such as assassination plots also aroused strong public and congressional opposition.

The result was the placing of specific restrictions on the CIA. One was aimed at covert actions, which Turner defines as "attempting to influence the course of events in other countries without the source of influence being apparent."

Carter called in his State of the Union message Jan. 23 for loosening the restrictions. He asked "clear and quick passage of a new charter to define the legal authority and accountability of our intelligence agencies."

"We will guarantee that abuses do not recur," Carter said, "but we must tighten our controls on sensitive intelligence information and we need to remove unwarranted restraints on America's ability to collect intelligence."

The restriction on covert activity was in an amendment placed on the Foreign Aid Act in December 1974. It was introduced by Sen. Harold Hughes, D-Iowa, and Rep. Leo Ryan, D-Calif.

Intelligence Gathering Goal

The Hughes-Ryan amendment limits the CIA to "activities intended solely for obtaining necessary intelligence, unless and until the president finds that each such operation is important to the national security and reports, in a timely fashion, a description and scope of such operation to the appropriate committees of the Congress."

The "appropriate committees" were found to be eight — those from each house established especially for intelligence oversight and those dealing with foreign affairs, defense and appropriations. Their memberships, with some overlapping, total 222, and some 40 of their staff members are also involved in handling reports.

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mittee decided against hearing such reports, however, on the grounds that its two members who were on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence could represent it. So seven committees have been getting reports.

A senior staff member of one committee says that there have only been six or seven occasions in the last five years when the administration has made reports on covert activities. Two early cases of leaks to the press, about payments to King Hussein of Jordan and to Italian political parties, inhibited further reporting and therefore — presumably — further covert activities.

First President Gerald R. Ford and later Carter issued "general findings" that exempted two kinds of covert activity from detailed congressional reporting. They are CIA attempts to thwart international narcotics operations and international terrorism.

While refusing to give an explicit confirmation of these two exemptions, Turner said: "There's a regular, routine, formal procedure for insuring that we're not carrying out a general finding in a specific country where they don't want us to for some reason. So it's far from a blank check."

Changing the Hughes-Ryan reporting requirement is one part of the effort to relax restrictions on the CIA. The administration and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence are in general agreement on reducing the requirement from eight to just the Senate and the House intelligence committees, whose memberships total 29. The nature of the reporting itself is also expected to be changed.

There are two other parts to the unleashing package being pushed by the administration. One is an Intelligence Identities Protection Act and the other is a modification of the Freedom of Information Act.

The first is widely known as "the Agee act" because it is aimed at the problem exemplified by former CIA agent Philip Agee. He had made a career of exposing the identity of CIA people working undercover.

The act "would help to get at people who deliberately uncover the identities of our people or our agents when we have definitely tried to establish their anonymity," Turner said. But its terms have aroused opposition on freedom of speech grounds, and even the Justice Department has expressed doubts.

Turner said there is a broader principle involved in changing the legislative rules. "There was so much emphasis on (restrictions) in the past few years," he said, that "our people deserve to be told what they're allowed to do."

"They must be told what they can't do. (But) if you put too much in the can't-do, you tie the organization's hands," the CIA director said. "Once it's in law, it's inflexible."

Turner cited with satisfaction the passage in Carter's State of the Union message on the CIA.

There is no doubt in the intelligence community that Turner has established new controls and procedures within the CIA. But the effect of them is widely deplored.